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Iran: Implications of the Consolidation of Clerical Power

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An Intelligence Assessment

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NESA 82-10370
July 1982

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An Intelligence Assessment

This assessment was prepared by
of the Office of Near East–South Asia analysis. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Persian Gulf Division, NESA,

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It was coordinated with the National Intelligence Council and the Directorate of Operations.

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Approved For Release 2007/07/18 : CIA-RDP83S00854R000100070007-2

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Key Judgments

The Iranian revolution was not just a change of elites but a fundamental social upheaval that seeks to reshape Iran. The ruling clerics, firmly in power for the foreseeable future, are factionalized but agree on the principle of clerical dominance and on broad policy goals. They intend to limit political and economic ties with the West and eradicate Western cultural influences from Iran, govern by strict Islamic law, and promote economic self-sufficiency. The clerics' doubts about the loyalty of the regular military have been at least temporarily submerged by the war with Iraq.

The Khomeini regime sees itself as a leader of peoples "oppressed by imperialism," especially by the United States. Its unremitting hostility most directly threatens US interests in the Persian Gulf—where Iran is reemerging as the predominant military power. Its goals in the region include installation of a radical Islamic government in Baghdad, redirection of the other Arab regimes away from cooperation with the United States, and recognition of Tehran's primacy.

Moscow's interests are served by Iran's virulent anti-US attitude even though bilateral ties with Tehran are strained. Iran will meet its economic and military needs by drawing from both East and West but will reserve close political contacts for "friendly" Third World states, especially those in the Muslim world.

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Information available as of 16 July 1982 has been used in the preparation of this report.

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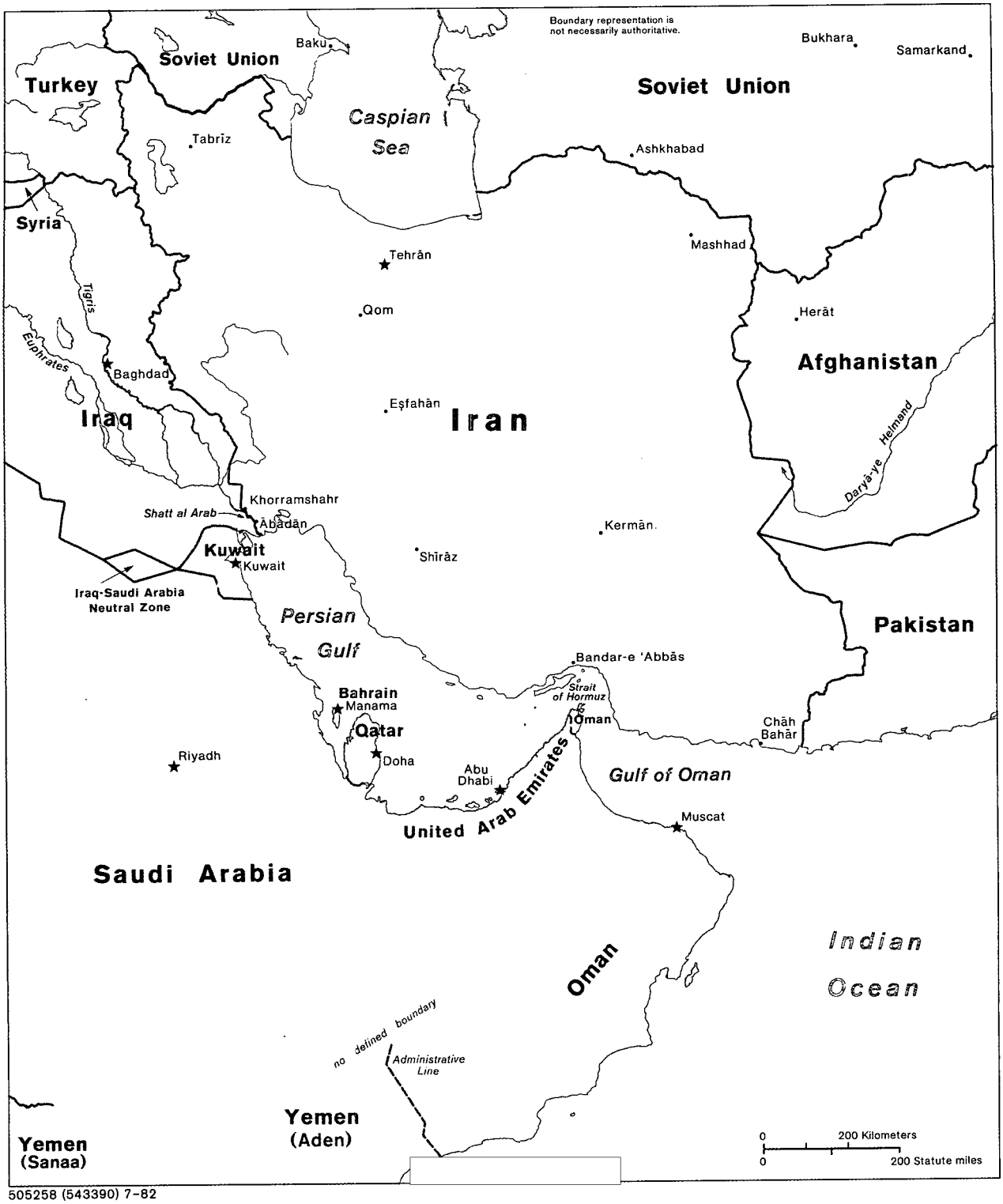

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Iran: Implications of the Consolidation of Clerical Power

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Consolidation

The clerics who dominate Iran's Government came under seige last summer after the ouster of President Bani-Sadr, their strongest secular challenger. By September the regime admitted publicly that over 300 middle- and upper-level officials had been assassinated by opposition groups.

The regime responded quickly with brutal repression. By fall Iranian official media said the regime had executed 2,000 "counterrevolutionaries"—probably an understatement—and jailed thousands more. Isolated assassinations of officials continue, but the serious terrorist threat to clerical rule has been overcome.

The opposition collapsed largely because it had shallow roots limited to the small upper classes. The largest and leading group, the Islamic socialist Mujahedin, had at its peak only an estimated 10,000 committed cadre according to members of the group. They were almost exclusively politicized Iranian students.

The Khomeini regime also demonstrated impressive resilience in replacing its many "martyrs." In a three-month period one parliamentary and two presidential elections were held and two cabinets were formed, while slain senior military commanders and leading clerics in several cities were replaced. The new leaders appear at least as capable as their predecessors.

The ruling clerics moved at the same time on a broad front to ensure support from the lower classes. Control of the media allows them to conduct a pervasive internal propaganda campaign. Revolutionary and religious organizations affecting many aspects of daily life are used to distribute supplies, free food, and ration coupons, according to Iranian press accounts. Mosques are used for political indoctrination. Sermon topics for Friday prayer services—at which attendance is mandatory—are controlled by the regime.

mosque-based activists gather information on local inhabitants for the security forces. The Revolutionary Guards, moreover, provide an armed presence in nearly every town and neighborhood—a constant reminder of the regime's power.

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The war with Iraq has permitted the clerics to focus popular frustration on external forces and justify austerity at home. Since last September Iran has had the initiative in the fighting, and this has helped boost the government's confidence and its popularity.

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Defeat of Iraq would further consolidate the clerics' confidence in their policies and in their ability to survive internal and external attacks.

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Other dissident elements—the Mujahedin, the "moderate" clergy who oppose clerical control of the government, ethnic minorities, and the exiles—will, we believe, play at most a marginal role in Iranian politics for the foreseeable future. The radical clerics showed their strength in April with a swift strike against Ayatollah Shariat-Madari, who was a symbol of the moderate opposition. The few other "grand" ayatollahs, who rose through traditional rather than revolutionary activities, can still delay such regime programs as land reform and nationalization of foreign trade. Their contacts with the Shah's government or with opponents of the Khomeini regime have been less provocative than Shariat-Madari's, but these clerics are vulnerable to similar attacks.

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Tehran's control in the minority areas on Iran's periphery is incomplete,

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but only the Kurds in the northwest have sustained an armed opposition. Iranian press accounts indicate the ruling clerics now are attempting to control the minorities by combining repression with development aid and limited concessions to local cultural customs.

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Clerical Factionalism: A Threat to the Regime?

As a result of the regime's success in countering the threat from internal dissidents, those opposed to the clerics—both in and out of Iran—now hope that factionalism among the ruling clerics will become so severe, especially after Khomeini dies, that the regime will tear itself apart. We believe, however, that most clerics are aware of the consequences of unbridled factionalism and will work out methods of compromise to assure their continued control.

The ruling clerics and their lay allies agree, for example, on the fundamental principle of clerical rule and on the broad outlines of government policy. Some of their disputes center on personal rivalries for power, and others concern differing interpretations of Shia doctrine on specific issues—whether or not Shia doctrine allows the nationalization of foreign trade and the extent to which Shia law permits land reform and the arrogation of private property to state control, for example. Although these issues are important in setting the boundaries of governmental authority and control over society, they are unlikely to bring civil war. The clerics are already moving to find compromise solutions.

Factionalism among the ruling clerics occurs within and among three loose groups: the Islamic Republic Party (IRP), which dominates the executive and legislative branches of the government; activist clerics associated with Iran's theological center in Qom who dominate the judiciary, mosque networks, and propaganda units; and some independent clerics with separate power bases and links to Khomeini. Iranian leaders admit that such factionalism still stalls controversial legislation, especially when Khomeini's guidance is ambiguous.

Significant Problems Remain

As these rivalries continue, the clerics will have to find ways to:

- Manage an orderly transition to the post-Khomeini era.
- Develop an economic strategy and restructure the society to provide the lower classes (the majority of the population), and especially the youth, with the prospect of economic and social betterment.
- Control the regular and irregular armed forces.

Succession. Arranging the succession to Ayatollah Khomeini is central to minimizing factional disputes and guaranteeing and solidifying future clerical control. Khomeini's position as supreme religious and temporal leader and his broad popular appeal enable him to provide legitimacy to the institutions and programs of the Islamic Republic. His blessing now of at least a nominal successor or successors would undermine potential challenges from regime opponents after his death and make an uncontested succession more likely.[1]

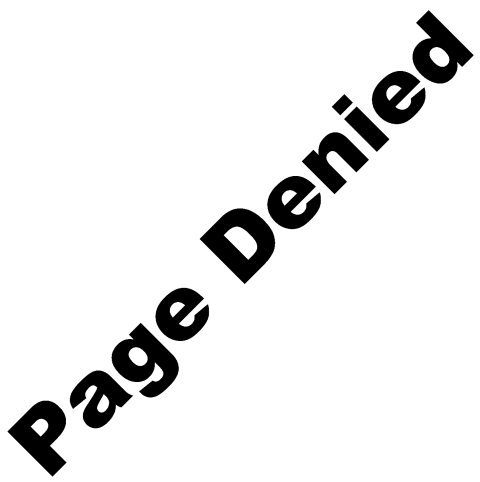
Preparations for selecting a successor were aborted in mid-1981 by the assassination of IRP leaders, according to prominent clerics, and again this spring by clerical infighting that culminated in the discrediting of Ayatollah Shariat-Madari. Ayatollah Mahdavi-Kani, a prominent cleric involved in the succession process, indicated in mid-July that Khomeini's heir would be chosen later in the month.

In late April Khomeini's son, Ahmad, gave a strong public endorsement of Ayatollah Montazeri—for years Khomeini's apparent choice. Most official observers and the press agree that Montazeri lacks Khomeini's charisma and authority. Whether he serves alone or is joined by other senior ayatollahs, real power is likely to be exercised by leaders from the major factional alignments:

- Within the IRP, President Khamenei, Assembly Speaker Rafsanjani, and Judicial Council head Ardabili, as well as their lay partners like Prime Minister Musavi.
- Within the Qom community, activists led by Ayatollah Meshkini.
- Such independents as Ayatollah Mahdavi-Kani and Heavy Industries Minister Nabavi.

These men lead factions of approximately equal strength, and all have repeatedly made public statements in support of continuing Iran's strong anti-US orientation. Without a leader of Khomeini's unquestioned authority, they will need to handle disagreements through the legislature and bureaucracy—unless one faction quickly dominates.

[1] The constitution provides for a single successor if the clergy and people agree overwhelmingly on his right to the post. Otherwise, a "Leadership Council" of three to five senior clerics will be chosen by a 70-man "Assembly of Experts" in religious law.



Institutions and Programs. The constitution makes clear that government institutions are to be dominated by the clerics and that they are to determine policies and programs. They probably will continue to appoint trusted laymen—many of whom probably have family ties to clerics—to implement their programs. Official biographies show that laymen such as Prime Minister Musavi and most cabinet and subcabinet officers are loyal, young technocrats, many of whom have spent time at religious schools, usually in Qom.

The constitution gives institutional primacy to the Majles as the forum for determining foreign and domestic policies.[2] Accounts of its debates show that the Majles has developed under Speaker Rafsanjani into a generally effective forum for airing and accommodating differences.

The regime has begun a fundamental restructuring of Iranian society. The clerics seek the imposition of strict Islamic law and the eradication of Western cultural influences. The Shia ideal of social justice leads them to combine belief and expedience into a populist program to eliminate extremes of wealth and poverty. Tehran has made clear that the Shah's grandiose economic and military plans will not be resumed. Instead the government will strive to make Iran generally self-sufficient in agriculture and basic industries.

Published accounts of the regime's domestic program include proposals designed to:

- Better the lot of the poor and reduce the rural exodus to the cities. Rural areas are to get roads, wells, electricity, and basic health care units. Those living in urban slums have priority in obtaining rationed staple goods. Better housing is a major goal.
- Reorder property ownership and foreign trade laws. Land reform proposals are designed to end the influence of the traditional secular and religious elites by regime control of large blocks of real property "on behalf of the oppressed." The regime's proposals for nationalizing foreign trade are aimed at limiting the influence of bazaar merchants—who so effectively aided the Khomeini forces against the Shah—and at regulating relationships with foreign exporters. 25X1
- Restructure the judiciary. Application of Shia religious law is designed to deter "un-Islamic behavior," provide swift and public justice, and eradicate Western values embedded in the Shah's legal code. Widespread use of clerical jurisprudents will magnify the regime's impact on daily life. 25X1 25X1
- Expand propaganda/indoctrination networks. The contents of broadcast and print media are tightly controlled by the regime and reinforced through mosque sermons to guide popular opinion. Moreover, all organizations have "ideological" sections that produce propaganda directed at specific audiences and monitor member or employee loyalties.
- Reopen or establish new schools with an "Islamified" curriculum including engineering, science, and medicine which are receiving emphasis at higher levels as a way to decrease the need for foreign expertise. Tudeh complaints aired in Soviet broadcasts reveal that known leftists are being expelled and that students sent abroad—though far fewer than under the Shah—go overwhelmingly to the West. Seminaries are expanding with a focus on legal training and apparently on foreign languages, according to Iranian press accounts. 25X1
- Reform provincial government. Plans under discussion in the Majles suggest some decentralization of power, local initiative, and concessions to minority sensibilities by permitting, for example, some schooling to be conducted in the various ethnic languages. 25X1

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[2] The Majles has 270 seats, but an estimated 40 to 50 are empty because of resignations, expulsions, deaths, or unstable conditions that have prevented elections. Most members' terms expire in early 1984. Byelections were to be held 21 April to 21 May, but there is no evidence that they have taken place.

Economic Strategy. For most of the last three years, economic policy has been ad hoc as the regime concentrated first on consolidating its political control internally and then on the war with Iraq. Both factors contributed to a fall in overall industrial production to less than half the prerevolutionary level. Agriculture has stagnated, and over 30 percent of the work force is unemployed and an equal number underemployed. Inflation has averaged 70 to 100 percent per year. Most food and consumer items—except those provided to the urban poor through the mosque-based welfare system—are strictly rationed or obtainable only at high black-market prices.

In recent months the regime has increasingly emphasized economic matters, probably because the clerics know that extended austerity, inflation, and unemployment threaten popular support for the Islamic Republic. The regime says it is developing a long-term economic strategy designed to promote self-sufficiency and prevent the reemergence of foreign influence.

The regime has publicly indicated its preference for increasing economic relations with the Third World generally, and especially with such neighboring states as Pakistan and Turkey. Last spring Iran signed major deals with both countries—barter exchanges worth $500 million with Turkey and over $1 billion with Pakistan.

President Khamenei has stated, however, that Iran will continue to trade with both East and West—so long as Tehran believes it is avoiding dependence. Trade patterns indicate West Germany, Italy, and Japan—all major buyers of Iranian crude—have already emerged as preferred Western trading partners. The Western share of Iranian trade will probably grow when Tehran begins reconstruction in earnest. The regime's strong anti-US bias will limit direct trade contacts, except in such critical areas as petroleum technology, but sales of US grain and other goods through European middlemen are likely to be brisk.

The Khomeini regime has renewed, and in some cases expanded economic relations with Communist states. It obtains weapons, industrial raw materials, machinery, and technical expertise from the USSR and other Communist nations. Bilateral economic relations are limited, however, by the Communist countries' inability to provide needed foodstuffs, sophisticated industrial equipment, and petroleum technology. 25X1

Military Role. Successes in the war with Iraq have at least temporarily halted the decline in the status of the regular military. Extensive purges have reshaped the professional services, and leading clerics now publicly proclaim the Army an integral part of the Islamic Republic. 25X1

After the war ends, debate on the structure and size of the regular military may resume. This is especially likely if some leaders attempt to manipulate ties with the military or if military leaders attempt to play a political role. 25X1 25X1
the clerics have tried to forestall such activity by infiltrating networks of loyalists at all levels of the armed forces. Khomeini himself has publicly ordered all those in the military to avoid partisan politics.

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The war has greatly expanded the Revolutionary Guard and the regular military—though it has not reached prerevolutionary manning levels. Both forces now seem committed to the Islamic Republic, but rivalries persist. After Guard units fighting in the war were brought under the Ministry of Defense, Guard leaders, for example, lobbied intensively to ensure independent representation in the cabinet. 25X1 25X1

the Khomeini regime intends to keep much of the military along the western border even after active hostilities with Iraq end. The regime will most likely want to prevent demobilized troops from returning to civilian society—and unemployment—by drafting them into reconstruction or rural development projects. 25X1 25X1 25X1

The regime's view of its military needs are far more modest than were the Shah's, according to a wide body of evidence. To the degree that Iran decides to resupply its forces, however, official statements indicate that several foreign sources will be cultivated to avoid dependence on any bloc for arms 25X1 25X1

The Revolutionary Guard and affiliated organizations—the Mobilization Forces, the People's Militia, and tribal irregulars—probably number at least 200,000. Collectively, they are larger than the regular Army—estimated at between 170,000 and 190,000—but except for a hardcore, experienced cadre of about 60,000, these elements are loosely organized and generally ill trained. Hard data on the numbers and role of these elements are not available, but in some major battles their presence has been a key to Iran's success. The paramilitary forces, however, have not replaced the regular Army, which remains distinct from them and bears primary responsibility for conducting conventional combat against Iraq.

Foreign Policy Prospects

The United States and the Gulf. The regime's foreign policy is conditioned by its unremitting hostility to and fear of the United States. This hostility most directly affects US interests in the Gulf region, where Iran is reemerging as the predominant military power. The Khomeini regime's religious zeal and traditional Iranian aspirations impel the clerics to seek regional hegemony. In the clerics' eyes the revolution was not intended for Shia Iran alone, but for all "oppressed" Muslims.

Tehran's immediate target is Iraq and particularly President Saddam Husayn and his secular Baathist regime. The Iranians have made clear that only an Islamic government in Iraq will be acceptable. Tehran also seeks to redirect the other Arab regimes in the Gulf away from cooperation with the United States and toward accommodation with Iran. Official statements from Tehran broadcast since mid-May maintain that the Gulf states must end their support for Iraq because their "future will be determined" by their relations with Iran. We believe the Khomeini regime will pursue its objectives through diplomacy, economic incentives, subversion, threats, and military action.

Of the Gulf states, Bahrain, with its majority Shia population, probably appears to Tehran as the most vulnerable to subversion. 25X1 25X1

Tehran, however, is also likely to concentrate on Saudi Arabia because of Riyadh's close ties to the United States, its leading role in OPEC, and because it has a substantial Shia community which constitutes a majority of the population in the oil-producing Eastern Province. Moreover, influentual Iranian clerics find offensive Saudi control of Muslim shrines at Mecca and Medina. Iran has repeatedly threatened Kuwait with retaliation for its financial and logistic support for Iraq. The Khomeini regime launched three warning airstrikes on Kuwait in 1980 and 1981. 25X1

Iran faces a major hurdle in exporting its Islamic revolution in the lack of sympathy between Shia and Sunni Muslims and between Persians and Arabs. Most Gulf states' Sunni Arab majorities may prove to be a natural barrier to the spread of the revolution. Still, we believe the Iranians probably are convinced they can overcome these sectarian differences and exploit the same popular grievances against corruption and the spread of Western, secular influences in the Gulf that led to the downfall of the Shah. 25X1 25X1

The USSR and Other Communist States. Iranian antagonism to the United States and Tehran's destabilizing effect on the region serve Soviet interests even though bilateral ties are strained. Relations with the USSR continue to be limited by the clerics' abiding suspicion of Moscow and hostility toward Communism. Substantial political differences between the two countries persist over specific issues such as Afghanistan and the USSR's provision of weapons to Iraq. 25X1 25X1

Economic and military ties have grown with both the USSR and other Communist states, however, as a result of the war with Iraq and Western reluctance to provide assistance to Iran. As these ties have grown, Iranian invective toward the USSR has lessened. 25X1

Bilateral trade with the USSR increased to a record $1.1 billion in 1981, slightly more than the prerevolutionary high and more than double the abnormally 25X1

low $515 million for 1980. there are now 2,500 Soviet advisers in Iran. At the same time, trade with Eastern Europe is double the prerevolutionary level.

Close to two-thirds of the approximately $1.2 billion in arms agreements that Iran was known to have signed in 1981 were with Communist countries, about half with North Korea.

"Neither East Nor West." Iran's relations with much of the rest of the world are only now taking shape. Undiluted hostility to the United States continues to color the Khomeini regime's perceptions of the West generally. Economic relations—or even improved bilateral ties—are unlikely to deter Iran from actions opposing Western interests.

The Khomeini regime sees its greatest diplomatic gains to be made in the Third World. It has vigorously pursued reestablishing diplomatic ties with many nonaligned nations and has resumed attending various conferences on Third World issues. It hopes expanded ties will help it to play the larger role in world politics the clerics believe appropriate for the Islamic Republic.

Given its antagonism toward the United States, Tehran's foreign policy positions accord generally with those of the more radical members of the nonaligned movement. In the Middle East it has sought to associate itself with the Arab rejectionist front composed of Libya, Algeria, Syria, South Yemen, and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

Elsewhere in the Third World, Tehran's expansion of relations has focused on economic ties with nearby countries such as Pakistan, Turkey, and India—all of which have substantial Muslim populations. Iranian leaders have repeatedly indicated in public and private that they want to develop such ties into an "Islamic common market" that will help balance the Muslim states' economic power against that of the West.

Implications for the United States

The United States—and the West in general—are confronted by a dilemma in dealing with Iran. On the one hand, the West has an interest in the unimpeded flow of oil and in preventing any growth of Soviet influence in Tehran. These interests argue for expansion of political and economic ties with the Khomeini regime where possible and even arms resupply to deter development of reliance on Soviet weapons. On the other hand, to the extent that the Gulf Arab states perceive the West to be courting Iran—their greatest current threat—their own sense of insecurity and isolation will grow. These states are likely to turn to the West for security assistance, but we believe Western help will be viewed in Tehran as hostile and directed against Iran. This may spur Iranian efforts to replace these regimes with ones more properly Islamic.

The West—and the United States in particular—has little leverage to affect the course of events in Iran or to advance Western regional interests with Tehran. Indeed, the clerical regime will be unwilling to resume normal relations with the United States for the foreseeable future. Even though Iran is willing to deal with some Western nations, it will continue to strongly oppose Western, more particularly US, influence in the Gulf.

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